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ABSTRACT

A model for communicative competence, developed by Swain and Canale describes four competences within the concept of communicative competence. These are linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Each one involves knowledge of and ability to use the competence in question. This model raises questions on several counts; for example, what is the nature of interrelationships between the competences? There are also questions concerning the transfer and universality of the competences, and questions concerning the function of strategic competence in the second language as opposed to the first. Other questions arise concerning the basis for communicative competence as outlined in the model, as well as its lack of attention to the role of the listener in a conversation, and the criteria listeners use to judge the communicative competence of native and non-native speakers. Empathy and interaction management would have to be part of a communicative competence test. A model is proposed that would include the first three competences listed above, but that would replace strategic competence by interactive competence including things such as empathy, interaction management and behavioral management. (AMH)

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TESTING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES*

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1.0 Overview

Recent developments in linguistics, socio and psycholinguistics, applied linguistics and language teaching theory have resulted in a reworking of ideas in the field of testing. As the theorists[1] in the above fields have formulated new and more elaborate definitions of communicative competence, the testing specialists have tried to sketch theoretical frameworks and construct skeletal models that would encapsulate all the aspects of communicative competence. This enterprise, to date, has been promising but it still presents more questions than answers. In this short article, a recently-proposed model of communicative competence will be examined, some questions about its adequacy will be raised, and a possible new approach for researching and measuring communicative competence will be suggested.

The most detailed theoretical framework for the testing of communicative competence has come from Swain and Canale (1980) with subsequent revisions by Canale (1981). The authors describe four competences which comprise the concept of communicative competence:

1) Linguistic competence: knowledge of the phonology, morphology lexicon and syntax as well as how these different aspects intermesh at all levels;
2) Sociolinguistic competence: this regroups much of what was proposed by Hymes, Widdowson, Halliday and Haberman and includes a speaker-hearer's ability to interpret and use utterances in social contexts involving variables such as role, setting, channel;

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3) Discourse competence: knowledge of and ability to use the rules of cohesion and coherence needed for understanding and producing a text);

4) Strategic competence: knowledge of the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that might be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient grammatical or socio-linguistic competence.

Each competence involves the **knowledge of** and the **ability to use** the competence under consideration. For example, a competent speaker would know that in formal settings involving communication with an older speaker or one who is of higher status, polite forms of speech that show deference and respect are normally used and would know that such forms are to be selected accordingly.

2.0 Comments, Criticisms and Revisions

2.1 Interrelationships

No mention is made of the relationship between the different competences in this componential model. What, for example, is the relationship between the development of linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. Courchêne (1980) in a preliminary study found that there was no one-to-one relationship between the two. Does a non-native speaker have to attain a certain level in one or the other of the competences before there is any cross-fertilization between the two? Would an integrative model such as the one which Oller (1979) is trying to work out with his expectancy grammar be a more fruitful avenue of research? In addition, as regards the four sub-competences and their individual components, what weight does one give to each? Are sociolinguistic factors as important as discoursal and linguistic ones? Should strategies be given a positive value if their use indicates a lack of competence?[2] Until such questions are carefully examined and settled, the testing of communicative competence in an effective and comprehensive way remains a goal and not a reality.

2.2 Transfer

In a similar way, one can raise many questions concerning the transfer and universality of such competences. Are these competences universal? How much does a native speaker of Arabic transfer to English from his native language insofar as sociolinguistic and strategic competence is concerned? Do Arabic speakers, for instance, have the same strategies and social conventions as English speakers? It is important to know what will be transfered so that teachers will know what can be presumed as knowledge, and, thus, order and present materials accordingly. As well, such information will be important for testers in making decisions as to what should be tested and how. The same questions could be raised for discourse competence. Finally, can we also talk about positive and negative transfer with respect to the sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences as we have done in the past with linguistic competence?

2.3 Placement of strategic competence

Questions concerning whether or not strategic competence should be included as one of the competences, as well as how it functions in the second language as opposed to the first language, have not been settled. The first part of the Canale-Swain discussion centers around the placing of strategies in the area of competence as opposed to performance. Are strategies something peculiar to communicative competence or do they belong to the general bank of human behaviors, skills and abilities that are involved in all types of learning tasks? Should they not be classed with other performance phenomena that affect communication as, for example, memory constraints, fatigue and weather? Further, how do strategies function in the second language? Strategic competence is really a paradoxical competence; it is a stratagem that one uses when one does not have adequate competence in the second language. Native speakers would not use the type of strategy that Tarone (1980) describes as transfer; they do not borrow words from another foreign language (we are talking about unilingual speakers). However, the native speaker often uses strategies such as hesitation and re-wording, not because of lack of competence but rather to enhance his or her speech style, or to emphasize a point. Much

work is still needed in clarifying just how such strategies function in the second language. Learners must already have a certain command of the language system before their capability in using certain strategies can be assessed. Furthermore, it would be difficult to create naturalistic contexts to verify whether the learner in question was, in fact, able to employ certain strategies.[3]

2.4 Basis for the model

Upon what model is the communicative competence as outlined by Swain and Canale based? The communicative competence of an educated speaker? The Chomskyian ideal speaker in a homogeneous speech community? If the communicative competence of the native speaker is held to be the model, which native speaker or group of native speakers was chosen as the model? What is a competent native speaker? Does this person need to have a command of all the registers? Do we have linguistically and sociolinguistically incompetent native speakers? If the idealized non-native speaker is the model, will the definitions of competent non-native speakers vary from context to context, from group to group? How do we account for differences related to class distinctions and social expectations? All these questions lead to the more basic ones: "Is it possible to define a minimum level of communicative competence that would correspond to the threshold level (Van Ek) of the Council of Europe? Or, must we define communicative competence for each group of people in a specific language context?" Until the above questions have been thoroughly researched, it will be difficult to describe and to construct a general model of communicative competence.

2.5 Qualifications to the description of communicative competence

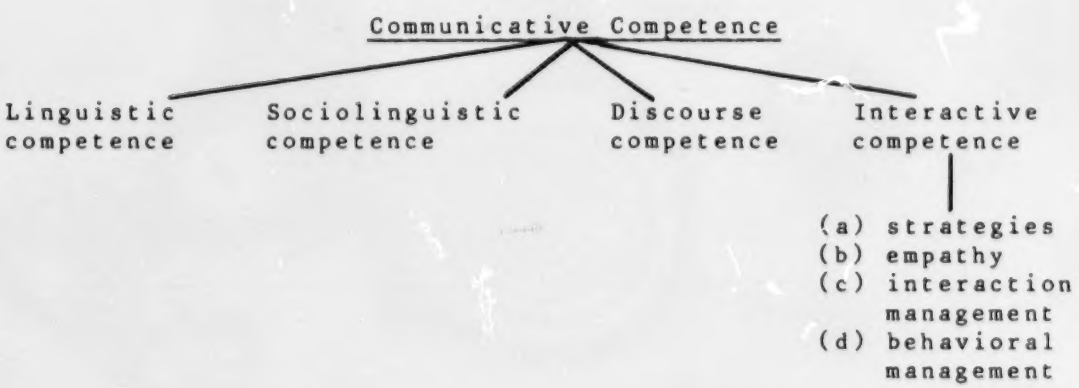
In outlining a model of communicative competence, the majority of theorists have looked at communication from the point of view of the speaker. They have described what they believe a speaker would have to be able to do with the language to be considered competent. While this is important, we believe that it does not represent the whole picture. We believe that communicative competence should also be looked at from the point of view of the listener. What criteria do listeners use to judge the communicative competence of native and non-native speakers? Would the criteria selected be included in the above four

competences as outlined by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1981)? In our opinion, the answer is no. The research carried out in the field of human communication and speech as well as in the area of second language learning[4] has demonstrated that factors such as empathy (affiliation and support), behavioral management (turn-talking, gambits for openings and closings, interruptions) behavioral flexibility and phonological characteristics--all influence the interlocutor's assessment of a speaker's communicative competence. It is certainly easy to imagine the casof a person who would qualify as being communicatively competent according to the description presented above by Canale and Swain but who would still be judged as an ineffective communicator because he or she did not know how to manage a conversation effectively. In order to test communicative competence in an exhaustive manner, we will have to devise a method to determine exactly what weight should be given to factors such as empathy andinteraction management. Without looking at how the communication affects the intended audience, we can only evaluate part of a speaker's communicative ability.

In light of the preceeding discussion, we would like to propose a new model for the description and testing of communicative competence (see Figure I below). It would include the first three competences as proposed by Canale and Swain; however, it would replace strategic competence by interactive competence such as empathy, interaction management and behavioral management.

FIGURE I

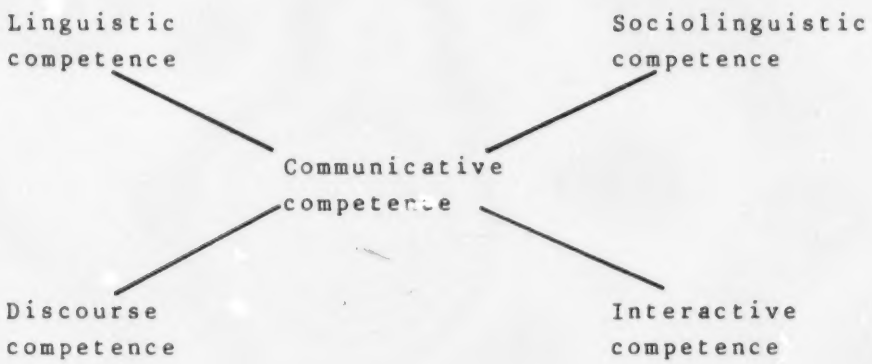
A Theoretical Framework for Communicative Competence



In addition, we would like to propose a dynamic integrated model rather than a componential model (See Figure II). We believe that these two changes will result in a new theoretical framework that will provide a better description of what constitutes communicative competence, and how the different subcompetences interrelate and influence one another.

FIGURE II

A Dynamic Integrated Model of Communicative Competence



NOTES

1. Chomsky, Habermas, Widdowson, Munby, Swain, Canale, Oller, Hymes, Halliday, Weimann and Backlund.

2. Personal Communication from Pierre Vigneault, doctoral candidate in Education at the Université de Montréal.

3. Personal Communication from Margaret DesBrisay at the Center for Second Language Learning.

4. Weimann and Backlund: 1980; Norton: 1978; Ruben: 1976; Kelly and Chase: 1978; Hymes: 1971 and Farech et al.: 1980.

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